ADMINISTRATIVE ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE LIBRARY

By Marilyn E. Schafer

Administrative accountability is a standard, universally accepted practice in business administration but one frequently ignored, shied away from or glossed over by librarians with inadequate reporting upward within the organization. There has long been the feeling that we're different, our motives are so pure, our mission so beyond reproach that it is an insult to be asked to account for the funds and functions under our control.

The Oxford English Dictionary defies 'accountability' as 'the state of being liable to be called to account, responsibility' and 'account' as 'a statement of the administration of money in trust hence, a statement as to responsibilities generally, answering for conduct'. Thus, the concept is simply that of providing upper management with a statement of how your responsibilities have been and are being carried out; a frightening idea only if you've not been doing your job. In modern business practice all units are expected to account to the organization for their actions and the library has more to gain within the host organization by following accepted practice. How else do you think other units get more support from administration than you do!

Some of the problems that librarians are faced with in management positions stem from the traditional 'professional' education we have had. A librarian is trained as a professional in the same sense as an accountant or an engineer; that is, the subject speciality is paramount in our education but we must all assume administrative responsibilities early in our careers. The librarian then identifies with the profession rather than with the organization in which he works. Personal professional goals may conflict with Corporate goals[1]. On the other hand, the executive tends to identify with the company first and to derive satisfaction and support from his peer group within the company.[2]

The special library exists as an information source in those fields of study, research and development necessary for the organization to carry out its stated objectives. To do this, it attempts to provide as much of the available relevant information as possible to its users. The librarian in this situation must wear two hats. One is an information specialist, who endeavours to ensure users access to as much meaningful information as possible. I say access because it would be impossible even foolhardy to attempt to collect and store all information needed by the users at all times.

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[1] Bailey, Martha J. The special librarian as a supervisor or middle manager. New York, SLA, (1977). p. 5

[2] Lynch, Beverly P. "The role of middle managers in libraries." Advances in librarianship 6 (1976) p. 256-257.

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The other hat the librarian wears is that of the manager. In this role, he or she not only manages the operations within the library but also must make representation on behalf of the library to higher levels of management.

Two major factors have been isolated that I would like to call "strategies to a healthy existence within the organization". These are: communication and awareness of the marketplace, and relationship to management.

Who should know better than the information specialist the need for lines of communication both formal and informal? Libraries cannot hope to maximize their contribution to the organization unless they know the information needs of that organization. When lines of communication break down, we are forced to wait for information requests, when we should be anticipating them. And without user feedback, it is difficult even to measure effectiveness, much less improve it. We find that formal communications through such programs as internal distribution of accessions lists, and orientation sessions for all new staff help to raise the level of visibility and encourage user feedback; yet informal links with individual users are equally essential to the provision of an effective current awareness program. In our library each librarian is assigned a liaison to a subject division. As such the librarian scans the appropriate journals and publishers' lists for the dual purpose of selecting books for the collection and providing a current awareness service to his or her division. The librarian also maintains as close a contact as possible with the activities of his or her assigned division in general and with the individuals within it in particular.

Closely related is our awareness of the marketplace. This marketplace of a government department or a corporation centers on stated departamental or corporate objectives, and can be equated to a certain extent to the marketplace in the private sector. No matter how efficient any unit is, it is *ineffective* if it does not contribute actively to the corporate goal. Translated to the library environment, this means that the most complete information, delivered in record time, is valueless if it is the *wrong* information. And the only way to know what the right information is, is to have an eye to the marketplace of the organization.

A factor of equal importance, and one that we, as librarians frequently overlook is our relationship to management. We tend to recoil from management systems, leaning on the age old excuse that "WE ARE DIFFERENT". We *do* have our pecularities, our areas where measurement of performance is difficult, but the longer we opt out of our management responsibilities on the basis of our differences, the more we stand to lose, wherever we are located within the organization.

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To understand this, one must understand the role of senior management. They have the task of allocating a scarcity of resources among a very great number of programs - as one writer expresses it - "of putting two and two together to get five". If we learn to speak management's language, we can gain a fair hearing when this allocation process takes place. We need to take seriously such responsibilities as resource allocation and operational planning; and maintain adequate meaningful statistical records to support our requests for additional resources, as these play a major role in senior management's assessment of our efficiency and effectiveness. In the absence of this hard data, resources are allocated on historic spending, and a subjective assessment of future needs.[3]

Often our accountability has been suspect because we lack adequate or effective means of identifying and describing our product, which is service. For example, the measures we now use to justify our existence include detailed statistics of loans, photocopies, number of reference queries received, number of books processed per month. There are merely quantitative and too efficiency and materials-oriented, masking our true product. In our positions as managers of service units in an organization we need new measures, qualitative, and more customer-oriented. Here, customer-oriented should mean the establishment of the information needs of your clientele in terms of corporate goals and the monitoring of how successful you are in meeting these needs.[4] It is necessary not only to do things right but also to do the right things. That is, it's our *effectiveness* that needs to be demonstrated.

Blagdon suggests three key library management questions for the measurement of effectiveness. Was the information read by the enquirer? If yes, did it enrich the thinking of the enquirer? If yes, was this in accord with corporate goals; in other words, did it help he or she to make a better or a quicker decision?[5] Yates suggests that "a unit could cost its time on an enquiry and ask the enquirer if the information was worth the cost."[6]

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[3] Mary I. Aitken, "Notes for a speech on the place of the library within the organization." Paper presented at a meeting of the Montreal Chapter of the Special Library Association, Montreal, Quebec, April 1976.

[4] Thomas J. Galvin, "Beyond survival: library management for the future." Library Journal 101 (September 15, 1976) : 1835.

[5] John Blagden, "Communication: a key library management problem." Aslib Proceedings 27 (August 1975) : 320.

[6] B. Yates, "The place of the information service in the organizational structure." Aslib Proceedings 25 (November 1973) : 435.

In reporting there are two major components; to whom do you report and what do you include in that report. I'll not deal with the former here but will reiterate for emphasis Yates' five suggested points to include in a report to management:

1. the number of queries not answered satisfactory and the reasons why;

2. the outside contacts that you've made which will assist in the answering of queries;

3. the means you are using to obtain feedback from the enquirer. How you are relating to the information needs of the enquirers;

4. an indication of those areas of the organization not utilizing the information services and suggested reasons why this is so;

5. the library's views of internal communications and problems the library has in communicating its needs and obtaining information on the requirements of the organization.

If, every year, a library can have about a dozen specific anecdotes about how it has helped the corporation, this can be much more effective than any mass of statistics.

As you can see, each of these two factors communications and the marketplace, and relationship to management, are so very interrelated that it is difficult if not impossible to merely list them one at a time, then develop points under each heading. If one is handled well or badly then the others will be affected well or ill as appropriate. However, I hope I have given you some constructive points to use now and some further references of value. Don't fear reporting upward for "the better your relationship with management, the easier it is to justify your existence."[7]

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[7] B. Yates, "The place of the information service within the organizational structure." Aslib Proceedings 25 (November 1973) : 442.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author acknowledges the extensive assistance and support of Mary I. Aitken, Chief Librarian, Department of Finance/Treasury Board, Government of Canada.